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Celebrities

Noora Kotilainen

Stories of the suffering of global others are today regularly mediated by celebrities: entertainment stars, film, rock, and TV celebrities as well as philanthropic billionaires featured in NGO advertisements, all with the aim of raising awareness about humanitarian issues on the news and in TV shows as well as speaking at international summits for a more just world. Since modern global humanitarianism is unable to engage the willing and able to help spectators via direct action, acting on behalf of vulnerable populations, it is dependent on spectacles that bring the suffering of distant others to the awareness of the surrounding world. Celebrity advocacy acts as a communicative arrangement aiming to bridge the gap between the global core areas of vulnerability (i.e. the crisis areas of the Global South) and the populations of the Global North, between those who suffer and those who watch from a distance (Chouliaraki, 2013).

Celebrity faces first entered the humanitarian imaginary already in the 1950s, when the United Nations (UN) started using glamorous Western stars, such as Danny Kaye and Audrey Hepburn, as “goodwill ambassadors” and “messengers of peace.” Nevertheless, in the last couple of decades many admired, wealthy, and Western elite individuals have saturated the humanitarian visibility and lent a photogenic face to issues of transnational solidarity. Celebrities like Angelina Jolie, Madonna, Bono, George Clooney, Oprah Winfrey, and Bill Gates have become the most visible characters speaking for the global needy and poor. Moreover, today, in addition to acting as the marketing tools of NGOs, celebrities themselves organize spectacular media events, establish their own charities and humanitarian projects, and have made their way higher up into the circles of diplomacy and international political power (Yrjölä, 2014; Chouliaraki, 2013; Wheeler, 2011).

Celebrities certainly have of late been central in drawing public awareness to humanitarian issues and have indeed succeeded in popularizing some otherwise neglected episodes in human events (Cooper, 2008). Nevertheless, celebrity humanitarianism has been a source of critique from a number of directions. Much research has raised concerns about the mobilizing ability, added value, and emancipatory potential of celebrity humanitarianism, and numerous studies have drawn attention to the ethical problems embedded in such activity.

One central critique has been that celebrity humanitarianism does not challenge the root causes of the injustices and inequalities that humanitarianism seeks to redress in the first place. Rather, it has been argued, the celebrity humanitarianism of recent decades merely serves to legitimate and promote neoliberal capitalism and global inequality, and it is therefore quite destructive for the Global South (Kapoor, 2012). Global politics and its ties of celebrity humanitarianism together with global North–South relations in general have also been considered in many studies (Richey, 2015). Celebrity humanitarianism has also been seen as consolidating stereotypical imaginaries of the global others, namely of Africa and its “childlike” populations, unable to help themselves without the assistance of wealthy, powerful, and exceptional celebrity humanitarians. Colonial undertones are clearly evident in the celebrity humanitarian narrative (Yrjölä, 2014). The conventions of celebrity humanitarianism therefore in many ways encapsulate the problematics of the global

humanitarian system and its inherent hierarchical global political arrangement. Therefore, celebrity humanitarianism is an effective lens for scrutinizing contemporary global politics.

Today, the endeavors of the wealthy, white, and beautiful, of privileged elite individuals speaking on behalf of populations in vulnerable positions and living in poor conditions is perhaps more often met with cynicism, and it seems that many are increasingly viewing the credibility of celebrity humanitarianism with suspicion. The egoistical White Savior Complex (Cole, 2012) inherent in celebrity humanitarianism, the global inequality and hierarchy directly evident in the celebrity logic, may even today, in the age of rising media literacy, be at risk of backfiring on the celebrity driven campaigns and causes. The hypocrisy evident in the activism of influential elites who have themselves benefitted from the globally unequal system and hierarchy actually poignantly reveals the realities of the global intersections of race and class-based oppression (Hopkins, 2017).

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